

Durham Research Online

Deposited in DRO:

09 May 2018

Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Bexley, E. M. (2018) 'Book review of Ginsberg, L. D. Staging memory, staging strife : empire and civil war in the Octavia. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. xii + 229. ISBN 9780190275952.', *Journal of Roman studies.*, 108 . pp. 280-281.

Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0075435818000540>

Publisher's copyright statement:

This article has been accepted for publication and will appear in a revised form in *Journal of Roman Studies* <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-roman-studies>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works. ©The Author(s) 2018. Published by The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.

Additional information:

Use policy

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

L. D. GINSBERG, *Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. xii + 229. ISBN 9780190275952. £47.99.

From its first flush of excitement in the 1980s through to its present establishment as a core methodology for classicists, intertextuality has fastened its grip ever more tightly on the field of Latin literary studies, to the point where it threatens to deprive it of oxygen. Like an aging emperor, no longer able to rule yet unwilling to relinquish the power he has wielded for so long and so successfully, this obsession with charting intertextual references remains dominant among Latinists even though its energy is now spent and the benefit it confers on the discipline minimal at best. Freedom from this iterative way of thinking cannot come too soon.

Enter Ginsberg's monograph on the *Octavia*, which is both a symptom of current methodological trends and a possible solution to them, inasmuch as it amalgamates intertextuality with cultural memory, exploring how literary allusion both transmits and shapes a culture's recollection of its shared past. This study aspires to depict poetic *imitatio* as less a self-reflexive game than a means of preserving, interpreting and negotiating different versions of Roman history; G. argues that the *Octavia*'s multivalent evocations of civil strife intervene, at the practical level, in fashioning the Romans' memory of Nero in the chaotic period following his downfall, and that they contest the historical record as found in and preserved by earlier authors, from Vergil and Lucan to Augustus himself. The result is a richly-layered discussion of the play's thematic texture, its complex allusivity and concomitant worth as an object of serious scholarly analysis.

Ch. 1 examines how Octavia and Agrippina align themselves with past (literary and/or historical) victims of Roman imperium, principally Lucan's Pompey, and Vergil's Aeneas and Dido. This technique, G. argues, enables the playwright to illustrate the repetition of civil strife across successive generations of Julio-Claudians, and also to place in conflict positive with negative readings of the *Aeneid*. Chs 2 and 3 analyse in turn Seneca's address to Nero and Nero's reply to Seneca in Act 2, the former as a pro-Augustan narrative of civil war adapted from Augustus' own record of events, and the latter as a violent piece of *realpolitik* built from images of rage and blood in Lucan and Vergil. Nero's account offers a competing, less sanitized way of remembering Octavian's rise to power. Broadening focus from the *domus Augusta* to the *populus Romanus*, Ch. 4 sees civil war as the model informing Nero's interaction with the Roman people throughout the play: the revolt of A.D. 62 and its suppression take on the colouring of full-scale *bella civilia* via the playwright's use of

established civil war *topoi*. The fifth and final chapter proposes, through close study of the *Octavia*'s dual chorus, that this play implicates the general populace, too, 'in Rome's predilection to wage war on itself' (20). A brief epilogue deals with the vexed issue of the play's dating and considers whether the *Octavia*'s author alludes also to the civil wars that erupted immediately after Nero's death.

For all its promise, G.'s monograph falls short in several important regards. First, the bulk of its analysis remains ploddingly intertextual despite enticing hints to the contrary. By far the greater part of each chapter is spent teasing out the *Octavia*'s lexical echoes of earlier texts, not all of which are equally convincing – and this is the second major shortcoming. A lot of G.'s comparisons are weakened by reliance on bland phrases or unremarkable words (e.g. *merui*, 52; *incruentus*, 74-5; *petit Nilum*, 104; *attonitus*, 127-8), a method that ends up stretching the parallel and rendering it virtually meaningless. The phrase *terra marique* is used to link Seneca's portrayal of Augustus at *Oct.* 479-80 (*illum tamen fortuna iactavit diu / terra marique per graves belli vices*) with Augustus' self-commemoration in the *Res Gestae* (3.1; 4.2; 13), despite the phrase's ubiquity, which G. admits (71) and then proceeds to confirm when she uses another variant – *maria ac terras* – to compare *Aen.* 1.56-63 and *Oct.* 483-4 in the context of an entirely separate argument (118). Can such generic connections really be considered viable instances of intertextuality?

Other comparanda are equally tenuous and suggest an overly mechanical reliance on PHI. It is a long shot to claim (93) that *Oct.* 503-4 (*quantum cruoris Roma tum vidit sui, / lacerata totiens!*) recalls Propertius 2.15.45-6 (*nec totiens propriis circum oppugnata triumphis / lassa foret crinis solvere Roma suos!*) or (56) that *Oct.* 613 (*infelix amor*) echoes *Aen.* 1.749 (*infelix Dido, longumque bibeat amorem*). Frequently, G. takes the native elasticity of intertext too far, ignoring changes in a word's syntactical or semantic function (e.g. 138 aligns *Oct.* 858, *tua temperet nos ira* with *Aen.* 1.57, *mollitque animos et temperat iras* – a far from perfect match). Translation is sometimes awkward, too, e.g., 'sprinkled throughout the globe' for *sparsa per orbem* (*Aen.* 1.602; 94) and 'befouled a father's face with a funeral' for *patrios foedasti funere vultus* (*Aen.* 2.539; 35) where 'death' or 'corpse' would have been better.

But the biggest disappointment of G.'s monograph is its failed bid to reinvigorate intertextual study for a new generation of Latinists. How literature replicates, fabricates and codifies cultural memory is an exciting new way of analysing poetic traditions, but G. too often declines its challenge in favour of well-trodden paths. This in itself is evidence of how

ingrained the dominant paradigm has become and just how desperately it needs to change;
unlike Octavia, Latinists must look to the future.

Erica Bexley

Durham University

erica.m.bexley@durham.ac.uk